



The God I Don't Understand - a review

Chris Knight

The God I Don't Understand – reflections on tough questions of faith

Rev Christopher J.H. Wright
Zondervan 2008

A mind without limits?

This is a book that encourages as it informs, helping its readers as we seek to understand something of God and His ways. Its four parts each start with a question that can intellectually challenge or emotionally disturb: the problem of evil; God's command to Israel in the Old Testament to kill all the Canaanites; the Cross; and the end of the world. In each area, Christopher Wright considers what we can, and cannot, know about each issue. His responses are based on clear biblical analysis, what they teach and what they suggest, but without going inappropriately beyond scripture.

The title of the book doesn't indicate that Wright is having doubts about his faith, but is a recognition of God's Sovereignty as Creator and our limits as created beings. Our knowledge of God and of his ways depends on revelation. The Book of Nature takes us only so far – the Book of Scripture takes us further. But we should not expect even that to impart omniscience. God reveals what he wishes to reveal and conceals (or at least refrains from revealing) what he does not wish or require us to know.

Wright addresses a number of topics where he realises that God simply does not reveal all that we might wish to know. Some of these are

apologetic issues and some are doctrinal, although the latter, of course, can also raise apologetic concerns. He states his purpose thus:

while accepting there are things we cannot understand, we will at least be able to think a little more clearly about things we should understand – things that are often in danger of getting confused by false and unbiblical notions or popular caricatures of the truth. (page 111)

Apologetic issues

Part 1 of the book addresses the problem of suffering. Three chapters in turn consider the mystery of evil, the offence of evil and the defeat of evil. This is not an opportunity to elaborate on the usual responses to the problem of evil, but rather emphasises areas where the limits of our knowledge are clear and, Wright argues, where those limits are for our own good. Evil does not 'make sense' – and perhaps therefore we cannot hope to 'understand' it in any complete sense. But the offence of evil, the tragedy of its intrusion into a good universe, is acknowledged within scripture as we read, and can echo, the protest and lament at the apparent (but in fact temporary) dominance of evil. For the Cross clearly demonstrates the ultimate defeat of evil, as the new creation that it heralds will forever eradicate, heal or redeem all that was not a part of God's original plan for his world.

Part 2 addresses an equally difficult question – God's command in the Old Testament to utterly destroy the resident Canaanites as the children of Israel come into the Promised Land. Wright initially dismisses three common approaches as unbiblical and unhelpful. Whilst he acknowledges that he has found no adequate 'solution', and that this is an issue that he still finds hard to stomach, he advocates three 'frameworks' which he believes can help to make sense of this disturbing episode:

We need to see the conquest narratives in the framework of the Old Testament story, in the framework of God's sovereign justice, and in the framework of God's whole plan of salvation. (page 87)

I found his application of these frameworks to be the most helpful part of the book, perhaps because this is an issue not often addressed (but

often brought up by sceptics) and therefore all the more welcome for the insights and perception displayed here. It's worth getting hold of the book for this section alone.

Doctrinal issues

Parts 3 and 4 move on to address doctrinal issues – the Cross and the End of the World – which form a different kind of 'not understanding'. The issues of Parts 1 and 2 can disturb us, but Wright affirms that "*there are other things that I don't understand, but I could not live without them, and they fill my heart and soul with immense gratitude, joy, and peace*" (page 109). The Cross is one of these areas.

In his consideration of the Cross, Wright provides a clear, biblical exposition of its meaning. This section uplifts the heart as much as it enlightens the head, as he writes movingly and convincingly of God's love and anger at sin. Wright provides a helpful exploration of the relevant issues, affirming a 'both-and' approach to the biblical truths of the meaning of the Cross rather than eliminating any particular aspect of biblical truth in an attempt to make do with a 'palatable' but diminished 'either-or' understanding. His discussion of the penal substitution controversy is brief but helpful, holding to a robust understanding of God's character and One-ness to rebuff the usual criticisms.

The section on the End of the World is a far cry from the certainties of the detailed timelines and 'future histories' held out in so many accounts. Wright emphasises clear and consistent biblical interpretation with the certainty of 'The Great Climax' (the return of Christ) and 'The New Beginning' (our resurrected lives). Whilst acknowledging his scepticism of many of the details often proposed, Wright's confident expectation of a new creation that refines and redeems all that is good from our current lives is clearly expressed. Our future hope looks to God's future reign and presence with us on a new earth where our lives will be purposeful and fulfilling, with nothing to frustrate or hinder.

Conclusion

Wright's book is honest in his uncertainties but nevertheless enormously helpful in the biblical

certainties and perspectives that he offers. In areas where difficulties remain, he emphasises that the revealed truths that God gives to us allow full confidence in a God whom we should not expect to fully understand, for otherwise he would not be a God worthy of our love and commitment. This book is a welcome antidote to apologetic and doctrinal arrogance, assuring us that within the love and faithfulness of God we can hold together our commitment and our certainties along with an honest acknowledgement of what we do not know or understand.

I leave the last word to Wright:

The God I don't understand has more things in his new heaven and earth than we can even dream of, let alone build into our puny theologies. But just working through the things that we can understand to some extent – on the grounds that the Bible teaches them so emphatically – is enough to set the pulse racing and the imagination soaring. (page 214)

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A Study Guide is also available.

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